

MENSTRUAL CRAMPS

Arizona Department of Corrections
Health Service Bureau

Inmate Wellness Program
HEP 1041- 01/06

What are menstrual cramps?

Menstrual cramps are pain or discomfort in the lower abdomen. They occur just before or during a menstrual period. **Dysmenorrhea** is the medical term for menstrual cramps.

How do they occur?

Dysmenorrhea is related to hormone changes in the body during your menstrual period.

Dysmenorrhea is usually caused by a natural change in the amount of a chemical called **prostaglandin** during your menstrual cycle. This chemical decreases blood flow to the uterus which causes the uterus to contract. Women who have painful periods have larger amounts of **prostaglandin**.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms usually last 1 to 3 days, begin shortly before a period, and can include:

- cramp-like pain
- discomfort in the lower abdomen
- a dull lower backache
- headache
- nausea
- discomfort in the thighs
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Over-the-Counter Medications

Menstrual cramps are often relieved by over-the-counter non-prescription pain relievers (such as ibuprofen) that are available in the inmate store. Take these medications at the first sign of bleeding or discomfort. If your periods are regular, and you can predict when it will start, begin taking the medication one day before you expect your period.

Should I Submit an HNR?

Although most menstrual cramps are normal, they can be caused by a disease or disorder. Submit an HNR if:

- Your discomfort lasts longer than 2 or 3 days.
- There are any sharp changes from your normal period, such as much heavier or lighter flow, a much shorter or longer time between periods, or any unusual pain or clotting.
- The pain is severe, not at the right time for a normal period, or does not seem like normal menstrual cramps.

Tracking the length and frequency of your periods will help you know what is normal for you. Also, regular pap smears will help detect any serious problems that can cause menstrual cramping.

How can I take care of myself?

In addition to over the counter medications, you can:

- Gently massage your lower abdomen or lower back.
- **Do pelvic tilt exercises** to help relieve menstrual pain.
 - Stand with your feet about one foot apart and bend your knees.
 - Place your hands on your hips near the hip bone and rock your pelvis forward and back 10 to 15 times.
- Continue regular activity and exercise but avoid prolonged standing or walking.
- Avoid food and beverages that contain caffeine, such as coffee, tea, colas, and chocolate, just before and during your period.
- Get plenty of rest.
- Eat a balanced diet.
- Avoid smoking, alcohol and illicit drugs.